

# WORLD WATCH LIST 2025

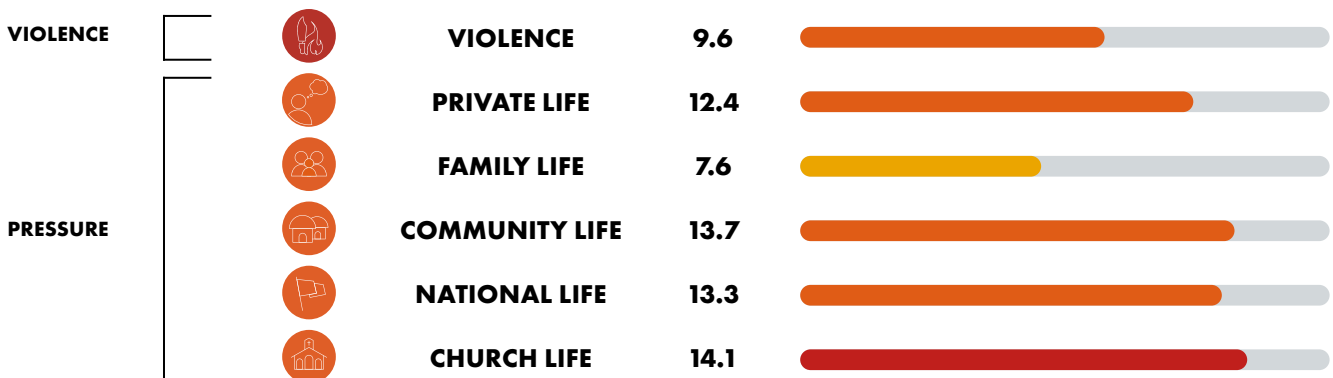
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

## NICARAGUA

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.  
**30**



### LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

## Key findings

Under President Ortega, churches and Christians who have expressed their disagreement with the government's actions are viewed as destabilizing agents. This makes them a target for intimidation, harassment, monitoring, legal prosecution, closure and expropriation of many Christian organizations (including universities and churches) in addition to violent actions with the aim of 'suffocating' the Church and silencing its voice. This has progressively intensified since 2018, after social protests, as church leaders and others have continued to denounce the injustices and human rights violations perpetrated by the government. The November 2021 elections and changes to the legal framework have been used for increasing restrictions on the Church and Christian leaders who publicly called for the rule of law to be respected - especially during and after the election period. The Church and Christian leaders who help those most in need and call for the release of political prisoners, including religious leaders, are especially vulnerable.

## Quick facts

### LEADER

President Jose Daniel Ortega Saavedra

### POPULATION

7,143,000

### NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

6,775,000<sup>1</sup>

### MAIN RELIGION

Christianity

### GOVERNMENT

Presidential Republic



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## Context

| Religious Context  | Number of adherents | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|------------|
| Christians         | 6,775,000           | 94.8       |
| Agnostics          | 198,000             | 2.8        |
| Others             | 108,600             | 1.5        |
| Ethno-religionists | 34,200              | 0.5        |

Source<sup>2</sup>

Nicaragua emerged from a four-decade dictatorship in 1979. Daniel Ortega became the country's president in 1984, leaving office in 1990. He came back to the presidency in 2006 and has remained in power ever since. Over the years, Ortega has become increasingly dictatorial. During the elections held in November 2021, Daniel Ortega and his allies [tightened their grip on power](#) amid allegations of irregularities and serious violations of human rights. Multilateral organizations and the international community condemned the election process and imposed sanctions on Nicaragua.

According to WCD 2024 estimates, 77.4% of Nicaraguan Christians are Catholics. Protestants and non-traditional evangelical denominations maintain a significant presence in the country.

Since social unrest began in April 2018, church leaders (mainly Roman Catholics) were involved in the

official dialogue between opposition groups and the government, first as mediators and later as observers. However, in March 2019, as an act of protest at the regime's lack of commitment and continued violation of human rights, the Catholic Church decided to [cease all active participation](#) in the talks. Since then, the outspokenness of the Catholic Church about the situation in the country has caused it to be regarded as a 'public enemy' by the government and its allies. As a result, church leaders and churches have been [frequent targets](#) for all kinds of retaliation, with the Ortega government using laws to criminalize opposing voices.

More details about the targeting of churches and their leaders appear in the 'Examples of violence in the reporting period' section below. In short, pastors (especially those critical of the government) have been fined, illegally detained and forced to flee the country. One such case is that of Bishop Rolando Álvarez, who was [sentenced to 26 years and 4 months in prison](#) after he refused to be exiled. GHREN (the Group of Experts on Human Rights on Nicaragua) has also documented cases of harassment, physical and verbal aggression, and criminalization of several evangelical pastors.

Church aid programs delivering necessities such as food, healthcare and education are viewed by the Ortega regime as weakening its control over the population. The blocking of church bank accounts has also been a huge obstacle for churches to

<sup>1</sup> Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

<sup>2</sup> Others include Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucian. Data source: Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

continue community projects helping the poor. The government has [canceled the registration and legal status of several organizations linked to the Church](#), including universities, [seized Christian-owned property and media outlets](#) and [closed Catholic radio and television outlets](#).

## How the situation varies by region

Persecution is present nationwide and at all levels. The cities with the highest number of incidents of persecution against Christians are Granada, Jinotega, Masaya, Jinotepe, Leon, Matagalpa, Boaco and Estelí.

## Who is affected?

### COMMUNITIES OF EXPATRIATE CHRISTIANS

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

### HISTORICAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

The largest group, the Roman Catholic Church, has seen multi-faceted forms of aggression and persecution by government actors, especially when the Church voices opposition to the government's dictatorial measures. Currently, it is the religious group most affected by state reprisals, as it is one of the last independent voices in the country and recognized by society as a legitimate institution and moral leader.

### CONVERTS TO CHRISTIANITY

Converts in Nicaragua are mainly former regime sympathizers or government officers who have become Christians. They are now considered part of the opposition, and similarly experience hostility from the regime.

### NON-TRADITIONAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

This category includes Baptists and Pentecostals. While a minority, they also experience hostility when expressing opposition to the regime (especially if they had previously been receiving support from it), with the main threat being the loss of legal status to operate in the country.

## Main sources of persecution and discrimination

### DICTATORIAL PARANOIA

Church leaders and Christian groups, especially Roman Catholics, face retaliation when they call out the regime and call for human rights and democratic principles to be respected. Church leaders have been mistreated, threatened, harassed, accused of being traitors and enemies of the state, arrested, prosecuted, and sentenced. Churches have also been vandalized and services disrupted, creating a climate of fear.

### COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST OPPRESSION

Socialist-Communist ideology is taught in schools and imposed on citizens through state institutions, sometimes violently. Along with repression, intense monitoring, censorship and harassment, Christians face aspects of their religion (religious festivals, Biblical references) being deliberately distorted in support of the regime's interests. This is a practice that is carried out in Communist neighbors Cuba and Venezuela, with which Nicaragua has a close relationship.

### ORGANIZED CORRUPTION AND CRIME

Corruption is a deepening problem in the country, along with illicit drug trafficking. The judicial system, security forces, and public services operate to keep the ruling party's leaders in power using sundry resources: bribes, manipulation, and political influence. Violent paramilitary groups (also known as "Ortega death squads"), criminal groups, and Sandinista mobs act in tandem with the government to repress opponents and dissidents. Christians are an especially vulnerable group since there is nowhere to turn for protection.

## How are men and women differently affected?

### WOMEN

Nicaragua’s legal framework provides for freedom of belief, religion, and worship and promotes equal empowerment of Christian women in all areas of society. Nicaragua ranked 7th in the world for gender equality in the 2023 World Economic Forum Gender Gap Report and is among the leading countries in terms of female educational attainment and political empowerment. However, the government’s clampdown on political opposition has contributed to increasing challenges to the civil liberties of women – for Christians, particularly Catholic women – who oppose the regime, alongside non-governmental women’s rights organizations being closed.

#### Female typical pressure points:

- Violence – psychological

### MEN

From verbal insults, death threats, and vandalization of religious items, a significant portion of hostilities by government and pro-government groups are targeted at Catholic priests, bishops, and other church leaders (who are primarily male). Politicians, such as the president, have described the Catholic clergy in Nicaragua as “killers” and “coup plotters” who promulgate “American imperialism”. Church leaders who are critical of the government can be forced to flee or arrested and sentenced to lengthy prison terms on false charges. Institutions linked to dissenters also face heavy sanctions by the government.

#### Male typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by government
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

## WWL 5 year trend

| WWL Year | Position on Open Doors World Watch List | Persecution rounded score out of 100 |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|
| 2025     | 30                                      | 71                                   |
| 2024     | 30                                      | 70                                   |
| 2023     | 50                                      | 65                                   |
| 2022     | 61                                      | 56                                   |
| 2021     | 63                                      | 51                                   |

*The upward trend in the country’s persecution situation continued during the WWL 2025 reporting period, with a rise of 1 point. Although the violence score remained stable at 9.6 points (with higher numbers of Christian buildings being closed and Christians expelled from the country), the average pressure increased slightly, with the most notable rises in the Private (+0.3 points) and Community spheres of life (+0.5 points). This was driven by increased hostilities against Christian individuals who refuse to show loyalty to the regime and instead remain steadfast in supporting their churches and religious leaders, amidst the harassment they face for being labeled “terrorists” or “enemies” of the government.*

*Repressive methods have become so systematic that they not only disrupt the normal development of church-organized activities but also impose a culture of fear and self-censorship among congregants to avoid becoming targets of a government that is increasingly restrictive toward the Church’s work in the country.*



## Examples of violence in the reporting period

- **March 2024:** Police [prohibited the Catholic Church from holding processions](#) during Lent and Holy Week. The authorities only allowed the ‘Stations of the Cross’ to be carried out inside or within church compounds, but not on the streets. Police surrounded churches in some parts of the country to prevent any processions from taking place. During Palm Sunday, police and paramilitary surveillance was increased. Seven young people who participated in Holy Week activities on public streets were arrested.
- **April 2024:** The Nicaraguan government [sentenced 11 evangelical pastors](#) associated with the US-based Mountain Gateway organization to prison terms of between 12 and 15 years and fines of \$80 million each, on charges of money laundering. The pastors were arrested two months ago and held in isolation without contact with lawyers or family members. (Vatican News, 3 April 2024). At the beginning of September 2024, members of the group, along with 15 other Christians who had been imprisoned by the regime, were released, expelled from the country, and exiled.
- **August 2024:** The Nicaraguan government, continuing its repressive trend of recent years, ordered the [cancellation of the legal status of 1,500 Non-Governmental Organizations](#) (NGOs), including at least 100 evangelical churches.

| WWL Year | Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed | Christians detained | Christians imprisoned or punished by the government | Christians forced to flee the country |
|----------|--|---------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| 2025     | 317  | 73                  | 38  | 94                                    |
| 2024     | 347  | 38                  | 22  | 71                                    |

*This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the country's corresponding WWL Persecution Dynamics. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10\*, 100\* or 1000\*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher. The same applies for symbolic numbers 10,000\*, 100,000\* and 1,000,000\*.*

### PRIVATE LIFE

Christians are targeted and threatened by the regime when they express faith-based political opinions criticizing the government, including on social media. The Special Cybercrime Law penalizes those publishing Internet content opposing the regime, which has led to self-censorship for many. Additionally, when a Christian is known as a regime dissident, his extended family members may find themselves being interrogated by the government. This in turn has led to the practice of family members turning in information to the government about their Christian relatives' activities and meeting places. Meetings with other Christians may be interpreted as conspiring against the regime, especially among Catholic Christians and in Masaya, Matagalpa and Leon. Christians' meetings have been monitored or disturbed by state actors and cars photographed.

Nicaraguans may in general own or keep the Bible and other religious materials, but those in government detention are not allowed to do so.

### FAMILY LIFE

Educational programs in schools indoctrinate young children in regime ideology. Children are forced to carry flags and banners praising the regime and to attend pro-government rallies. If parents try to shield children from state propaganda, they are seen as regime opponents and are at risk of reprisals and community pressure. Their children face discrimination and abuse, labeled as “children of terrorists” or “coup heirs.” Dissident Christians are at risk of kidnappings, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment. Many have been forced to flee their homes, causing long-term separation of families.

### COMMUNITY LIFE

Christians are under pressure to attend state propaganda events and extol the ruling party. In such a context, church activism or even association with church leaders is seen as a sign of national betrayal. The regime is also known to organize “religious events” without the involvement of church leadership,

to discredit church leaders and confuse the flock.

Similarly, Christians in the workplace (especially public sector) are pressured to attend pro-government events and to keep their religious views quiet for fear of reprisals. Students associated with Christian dissidents or targeted Church leaders have been harassed by pro-regime academics and administrators: suspended from school, expelled or handed over to the police on charges of terrorism.

### **NATIONAL LIFE**

To be linked with the regime opposition (via statements and pictures) is a reason to be targeted. Even political neutrality may be understood as political opposition for its lack of defense of the regime. The only political party operating without obstruction is the regime's ruling party. Christians who have attempted to create a Christian political alliance to participate in democratic elections have been met with restrictions. Christian civil society organizations run up against a new law that registers any regime political opposition as actions against the state, with

accusations as extreme as coup planning with foreign backing being leveled against them. Such measures have led to civil society almost disappearing. The regime's control of media and social media allows for the portrayal of Christians as terrorists and traitors planning a coup, intended to promote a climate of intolerance towards the Church. Attacks against Christians see no legitimate prosecution or punishment, ensuring impunity for perpetrators and stability for the regime.

### **CHURCH LIFE**

Many churches and their affiliated organizations constantly risk being stripped of their legal status, with permits and authorizations denied. This is a calculated move to undermine the Church's role as a distributor of humanitarian and medical aid and increase dependence on the state. With constant harassment (including travel restrictions and prohibition of religious services outside of temples) and reprisals against religious leaders, mainly Catholics, it is very risky to denounce the government as the instigator of persecution against the Church.



# International obligations & rights violated

**Nicaragua has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights under the following international treaties:**

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

**Nicaragua is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:**

- Christians and their activities are monitored by the authorities and the surrounding community (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Christian leaders are monitored, and their activities are actively watched (ICCPR Art. 17)
- Perpetrators of violence against Christians are sometimes left unpunished (ICCPR Art. 2)

## Situation of other religious minorities

According to the US State Department (IRFR 2023 Nicaragua), on October 21-22, unidentified persons vandalized at least 41 Jewish graves (located in a small corner of Managua's main cemetery) with red paint and swastikas. Similarly, a small public monument with a menorah was vandalized with red paint and damaged. According to reports, the government removed the markings.



## Open Doors in Nicaragua

Open Doors strengthens the persecuted church in Nicaragua through:

- Discipleship of pastors in training centers
- Distribution of Christian literature
- Training in teaching skills
- Emergency aid for the relief of persecution
- Preparation for basic primary and secondary education for pastors who have not completed their studies





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## ABOUT THIS BRIEF

- The content of this document is based on the more detailed WWL Persecution Dynamics per country published annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2025 Open Doors International.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the WWL Persecution Dynamics per country, accompanying Background Information per country and the latest update of WWL Methodology. These are also available at the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom).
- The WWL 2025 reporting period was 01 October 2023 – 30 September 2024.

*Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.*

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